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SUBJECT: WOMEN'S SYMPOSIUM GETS POSITIVE REVIEWS BUT MODEST TURNOUT

¶1. The University of Bahrain hosted a symposium October 1-2 entitled "Reinforcing the Role of Arab Women in Economic Development." The symposium brought together civil society representatives from several Arab and European countries in a preparatory event for the November 11-12 Forum for the Future Conference to be held in Bahrain. The symposium's focus was on increasing opportunities for women in business and entrepreneurial ventures; it also included discussion of other social issues. Although there was strong early interest when the event was announced in mid-summer, the 50 participant turnout was lighter than expected. Attendees praised the content and presenters, telling Poloff that they felt inspiration from the activities of pioneering women in the Arab World.

¶2. The symposium was opened by the President of the University of Bahrain, Dr. Mariam Bint Hassan Al Khalifa who said, "the Kingdom is heading towards development and is giving women opportunities to achieve leadership positions in all local associations." But turning to shortcomings, she said, "Women are more aware of their rights and are seeking amendments to various laws, but social aspects stand in the way. Women need to be given equal opportunities." The gathering received substantial media coverage, being featured on local evening television broadcasts and covered by the print media.

¶3. The symposium organized sessions into four main topic areas, each of which featured speakers highlighting different issues within the topic. The areas were Education and Training, Laws and Legislation, Cultural and Economic Awareness, and Women in the Workplace. Among the overall goals of the gathering were to build awareness about the social status of Arab women, build solidarity among participants, and work to end discrimination.

¶4. Eighty percent of attendees were Bahraini; several of the presenters were from other Arab countries and Europe. Poloff met with several organizers, presenters and participants to discuss the impact of the gathering. In general, participants found illustrative personal case studies most valuable. In addition to providing inspiration to participants, presenters gave practical ideas and suggestions that may be replicated in Bahrain and elsewhere. One particularly interesting study outlined the activities of five Bahraini women who started businesses with micro loans. Another presentation was given by a Bahraini woman who built a small roadside stall selling homemade perfume into a successful personal care products business.

¶5. Another stated goal of the symposium was to create a network of groups at the local, national and international levels. One presenter/participant expressed disappointment with the networking possibilities at the symposium. She told Poloff it is not sufficient to create a network among individual women or between women's organizations in different countries; rather, there needs to be a concerted effort to establish contacts in the mainstream male-dominated business sector. She had hoped that the symposium would provide such an opportunity. She recognized that cultural limitations in Arab countries inhibit such contacts, but thinks more effort should be made.

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